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ABSTRACT

When their children begin school, parents already have in place ideas and practices that have an impact upon their interpretation and incorporation of school culture. This paper uses Bakhtin's concepts of addressivity, answerability, and ethical activity to analyze key thinking related to home-school relations and to illustrate how parents of kindergartners and first graders from one elementary school frame their parental role in their discussions of expectations for their child, themselves, and their child's teacher. Data were collected by means of parental interviews as part of a larger ethnographic study on community beliefs about school readiness. The findings suggested that although parents' orientations were shaped by cultural meanings related to social class and gender, they were distinctly personal. Parents relied on their own experiences as students, professional experiences as educators, experiences with their other children and the school culture, and understanding of their individual children to frame expectations and gauge their child's progress. Cultural practices had a strong set of social networks used to help parents understand their role, provide resources for action, and set frameworks for action. Opportunities for parental congregation and information sharing were provided at the bus stop, through volunteering to gain information on their child's daily routine and to gain a voice with their child's teacher, and through developing a personal relationship with the teacher and maintaining a position of equality with staff without overstepping boundaries. (Contains 15 references.) (KB)

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Learning to be a Parent: A Bakhtinian Analysis of Home-School Relations[1]

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Elizabeth Graue

I see my child's kindergarten experience through his backpack. And more and more I realize that it is through that small container that I see myself as well. This realization came to me recently as I looked at a piece of paper with numbers one through ten written in hieroglyphic form of a new writer. My heart leapt as I rewound the tape of a child who until September was almost pencil/crayon phobic – who always chose pretend play or physical activity over fine motor activities such as drawing, coloring, cutting. He not only was traveling into the world of written literacy but its special genre of numeracy. What a great jump!

My reverie was jolted by the small note written in the lower left hand corner. "Writing numbers is difficult for Sam." My historical view of my child, built over five years of turbulent interaction had collided with the normative view of his teacher. The narrative of Sam's life was quieted by the authority of standards based on developmental comparison. And I lost my voice as a mother. I shifted to another identity, that of former kindergarten teacher and saw a boy in the context of a kindergarten program. His gifts were transformed to gaps and my mind scrambled to generate activities that would move him to a place that would garner a more positive note. A note about him and me.

I was addressed and a new world was framed between home and school.

Beth

Becoming the parent of a school-aged child for the first time is a jolt that is not foreshadowed in the literature and policy of home-school relations. Stories of first-day-of-school tears provide only a murky glimmer of the powerful experience of this new role for both child and parents. And it certainly is not unidirectional as hoped for in much discussion with educators (Henry, 1996). Rather than eagerly waiting for the guidance of school people,

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families[2] have in place at the beginning of school ideas and practices that impact their interpretation and incorporation of school culture. Families vary in their interactions with school people, in their resources for leveraging educational experiences, and their access to social networks related to schooling.

But what does not vary is the dominant cultural value in U.S. schools that parents can make a difference in their child's education (Patrikakou & Weissberg, 1999). The home-school link is seen as crucial for overcoming the many challenges presented to children in today's world and educators, policymakers, politicians, and scholars have presented a variety of models to describe and prescribe its nature (Comer, 1996; Epstein, 1994; Lareau, 1989; National Education Goals Panel, 1998; Harkness, Super, & Keefer, 1992).

In this paper, we will approach the issue of parents and schools as a "process of becoming;" as the establishment of a complex relationship between institutions and individuals that occur in specific contexts and times and that bear the marks of personal experience and social history. In earlier work, Graue (1998) used Bakhtin's notion of *answerability*, a concept that depicts a particular kind of responsibility, to critically analyze key thinking related to home-school relations. In this paper, we extend this analysis by applying it to an empirical context—we explore how parents in one elementary school come to understand and enact relationships with schoolpeople over the course of a school year. We analyze data from interviews with the parents of kindergarten and first grade children at the beginning and end of an academic year to illustrate their framing of their role as parents through their discussions of their expectations for their child, themselves, and their child's teacher.

Theoretical Constructs

What does the thought of a Russian philosopher whose work appeared primarily in the early twentieth century have to do with current relations between parents and schools? We have found Bakhtin's ideas helpful for a number of reasons. We were captured by his focus on the *particular* and *situtated* nature of self (Holquist, 1990), which we saw as a helpful counter to the universalistic orientations of much work in education, and particularly that focused on parents and school. Bakhtin proposes what Holquist & Liapunov (1990) call "a radical *specificity of individual humans;*" he works to generalize about uniqueness (Holquist, 1990). The focus leads to analysis that assumes that all action and utterance comes about with particular audiences and reactions in mind, providing a new way to leverage understanding of interactions. This relational approach to understanding forces attention to the intentions of actors and the resources that are available and utilized in relationships. In the case of parents and schools, this analysis would require attention to entities and their relationships because they constitute each other—it is *dialogic* (Holquist, 1990).

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[2] Within the term family, we include any constellation of persons caring for children.

This relational approach carries through to Bakhtinian conceptualizations of words and communication. Volosinov, a colleague of Bakhtin, has described an active image of the word or utterance, which moves us beyond static notions of words on a page to jointly held actions situated within time and space:

> *[W]ord is a two-sided act.* It is determined equally by *whose* word it is and from whom it is meant. As word, it is precisely *the product of the reciprocal relationship between speaker and listener, addresser and addressee.* Each and every word expresses the 'one' in relation to the 'other.' I give myself verbal shape from another's point of view, ultimately, from the point of view of the community to which I belong. A word is a bridge thrown between myself and another. (Volosinov, 1973, p. 86)

This view of language was very intriguing to us—the idea that words are acts can be reversed to think about acts as words. The dialogic nature of activity and communication, situated in local history and shaped by time provides much richer tools for understanding interactions and relations in any context. If we think that "Any utterance, no matter how weighty and complete in and of itself, is only a moment in the continuous process of verbal communication." (Volosinov, p. 95) we have much more contingent view of the interactions of parents and schools; one that is informed by multiple sources of power, knowledge, and action.

In addition, we were intrigued by his focus on *ethical activity* (Bakhtin, 1993) which seemed particularly appropriate for discussions of the relationships of those interested in education. The received wisdom of home-school relations assumes particular types of relationships—that if parents are devoted to their children and responsive to the requests of the school, then all will end well. But this assumes particular ways of interacting, assumptions of direction of responsibility, and certain notions of power. Bringing into question all of these aspects by framing these relationships ethically allows a much more nuanced examination of their outcomes.

One of the most interesting dimensions of the home school relationship is the fact that is in fact *a set* of refracted relationships—parents in relationship to children, teachers in relationship to students, parents in relationship to teachers, home in relationship to school. Each of these relationships provides a context for the other once children are close to coming to school. In fact they mutually constitute each other in ways that make it difficult to discern their relative contributions and effects. This is a very Bakhtinian way of looking at the world because "it is our relationship that determines an object and its structure, and not conversely" (1990, p. 5). This theorization will be used in this paper to understand how the roles of parents, schoolpeople, and children are framed relationally; that they become what they are in relation to others, both in the here and now and historically.

One way to understand these contexts and their relations is to frame the exploration in terms of *responsibility*. Particularly in power oriented and ethically informed relations like those of home and school, responsibility is a critical issue. In Bakhtin's early work, he suggested a notion of responsibility called *answerability*—an ethical response called for in lived experience:

> I have to answer with my own life for what I have experienced and understood in art, so that everything I have experienced and understood would not remain ineffectual in my life. But answerability entails guilt, or liability to blame. It is not only mutual answerability that art and life must assume, but also mutual liability to blame. . . .The individual must become answerable through and through: all of his constituent moments must not only fit next to each other in the temporal sequence of his life, but must also interpenetrate each other in the unity of guilt and answerability (Bakhtin, 1990, p. 1-2)

The term answerability could be translated from Russian as responsibility but Holquist notes that the more complex term of answerability was chosen to heighten attention to the dialogic nature of responsibility—we act in response to others and our experience. For Bakhtin, answerability is situated and individual, something that is only yours. There is no alibi, no way to offload your what is yours to do. This intensely situated focus is particularly well suited to the examination of home-school relations, given the intensely personal nature of parent child relations and their interactions with schools.

The notion of answerability has located within it ideas of power (Who is responsible for the development of a child?) and voice (Who gets heard in the discourse of the school?). We will follow these ideas through in our analysis of these parent interviews, exploring patterns in the positing of authority for children's education as well as the way that actions and relationships are authorized. We will look for patterns and breaks within and across the fall and winter interviews as well as within and between kindergarten and first grade.

The Study

The data on which we base this analysis come from an academic year long ethnographic project focused on community beliefs about readiness for school. Beginning in August, 1991 Beth visited a kindergarten and first grade classroom for 1/2 school day per week each, working as a teacher aide. These participant observations explored the curriculum practices in these two classrooms. Along with this observations, Beth interviewed the teachers, Mrs. Warren and Mrs. Harris, in September, December, and May. Their informal conversations over the course of the year were also a source of data. Special visits were made to the school for activities like goal setting meetings at the beginning of the year, parent-teacher conferences, and orientation meetings. This paper focuses on interviews with the parents of children in Mrs. Warren and Mrs. Harris' classes, conducted during August/September and May. These interviews explored

parental expectations and concerns about their child's kindergarten and first grade experience. We do not draw explicitly from the observational data or from the teacher interviews in this paper, but our understandings and interpretations of the parent interviews could not be done without our knowledge of the Solomon Elementary School context.

The parent interviews were analyzed to assess the how parents learn their role in relation to the institution of school and how in turn, they provide a role for the school in relation to their family. In the following sections we present our understanding of this process, with descriptions of the themes and theoretical constructs that provide shape to this understanding. We begin by a description of the school that provided a context for this project.

Learning to be a Parent at Solomon Elementary

Solomon Elementary is a school of the suburban 60's—sitting in a quiet neighborhood of ranch style houses in a midwestern college town, it is much like the houses that surround it—a single story, sprawling building with large windows overlooking expanses of green grass. The homes of middle class families make up one of the more "stable" school communities in town, populated by White, middle-class professionals where the majority of families have both parents living in the same house. The school has a reputation for high levels of parent involvement and high student achievement. At the time of the study, 92% of the students were White, 6% were eligible for federally funded Free/Reduced lunch programs, 90% lived with both parents, and the median family in come was $50,400 per year. Mrs. Harris, the first grade teacher with whom Beth worked, provided this description of the Solomon community:

> The community itself is probably middle to upper class. Generally speaking, the parents are well educated. Many of them have their undergrad degrees and one or two graduate degrees. I have noticed that a number of my children's parents work at the University. The parents—about 1/2 my class—both parents worked. The other half, the mother stayed home and took care of the younger children. The parents are very interested parents. In the two years that I've been here I have always had 100% attendance at conferences. Most children come with either preschool or daycare background or if they come from home they've come from very enriched homes. There are a few exceptions but they tend to be exceptions.

The interest that Mrs. Harris mentioned was manifest in a number of ways in the interactions between parents and teachers. In examining these relationships, we explored both their generalized patterns and individualized enactments. What we found was that the parents were alike in their idiosyncratic approaches to school. While their orientations were certainly shaped by cultural meanings that bore the marks of social class (Lareau, 1989) and gender (Smith, 1989) they were at the same time distinctly *personal*. Their expectations, goals, standards for performance, and strategies for parenting a school-age child were set within a

context of the personal experiences and social networks. Rather than complying to the agendas of the school, their notions of their role and that of educators was an act of addressivity—it was formed out of past experiences and poised to move in certain directions and for particular ends. They did not act in direct response to the actions of the school but instead their actions were *mediated* by a variety of social, personal, and professional issues.

Personal Experiences

As they worked to interpret their way through a new institution, parents relied on varied forms of experience. At the most basic, parents relied on their own *experience as students* to frame expectations and to gauge their child's progress. This was especially true at the beginning of the school year when parents were only beginning to develop a picture of their child's educational context. A didactic relationship was established between parental school experiences and the experiences their child will or has had. Some parents noted things had changed since they were in early elementary school and that the setting provided much more advanced content:

> I think it's real different than the past when I went to school. I didn't go to a structured thing until I was in kindergarten and now they have all these Bird's Nests [a local child care center] and so on where they have some kind of structured program where they get in groups and read and do the ABC's and that kind of thing. I like that. (Barry)

> I guess things have changed since we went to kindergarten and these kids have gone to kindergarten. It has been a drastic difference. We weren't expected to know anything and now it seems these kids come into kindergarten could be going into first grade. They know all the basics, they know the alphabet, the days of the week, colors. (Soren)

Memory provides a context that orients parents to the culture of schooling, setting frames of reference that do not involve direct interaction with schoolpeople. While teachers see children in their classroom, they also need to see past them to understand their parents biographies to understand how to meet the needs of important people not in the immediate classroom.

Professional experience can serve as a unique vantage point that sets interpretations and actions in motion that are independent of the school itself. Maureen's mother was a kindergarten teacher in another district and struggled to use or ignore that as a lens to understand her daughter's kindergarten year. When I asked her about concerns she had about the year, she replied

> I was concerned about myself at first, having expectations about Maureen's kindergarten experience being a kindergarten teacher myself. I had some trouble at first—well I do

this and I do that and this teacher, I don't see this happening and making comparisons. That was a negative for me at first. I had to back up and realize that it is a different group, a different teacher, different philosophies, and the Maxwell kindergartens.

One mom used a *lack* of cultural experience as a tool to understand her child's kindergarten year. As a German-born immigrant to the United States, Janie's mother did not have a local frame of reference to which she could link her expectations when her older daughter Hannah went to kindergarten. This lack of information cause a fair amount of anxiety and she found herself scrutinzing both her daughter and the school during that year.

> I wasn't even acquainted with the American school system because I went to school in Germany. It was like I was going to kindergarten for the first time too. Hannah and I were both very excited. What I like though was that I was able to come in and help Mrs. Warren in the classroom in terms of a parent volunteer and so I got a really good taste of what Hannah was doing during the day. I didn't have to sit at home and guess. . . .I suppose I was more nervous or questioning of what was going to happen. I didn't know what the expectations were. (Janie)

Things were quite different when Janie went to kindergarten. Relying on *experience with other children* provided Janie's mom an orientation to U.S. early education and also its enactment at Solomon Elementary. One of the strongest elements that framed parents' actions and reactions was their other children. This rich source of cultural knowledge was complex, having elements related to the local context at Solomon, normative elements that come out of comparisons, and individual elements that are linked to the characteristics and interpretations of an individual child. It was something that was only available to those with more than one child:

> Karen has four sisters so I am not real concerned about her social, getting along socially with the kids. It is amazing how different individual children are. Parents don't know that if they only have one child. It seems like my first and fourth are very much alike and my second and third are very much alike. (Karen)

> I don't remember [what my older son'ts kindergarten year was like]. The more you have one in school, you dn't get into this and know what to look for. I think it takes a parent one child to really learn how and what I should be looking for and how to be on top of it. When he was in kindergarten, I really didn't do too much. He seemed to be OK. But I wasn't concerned because he seemed to like it and be right up there and she seemed kind of advanced anyway. (Barry)

Familiarity with the school culture at Solomon provided families with a framework for expectations for their children. The edge of worry is softened for those who had had a good experience with their older children and they felt comfortable imagining how their child would do in school:

> I don't have a concern that's she's going to read or be able to function in math or anything like that, because I know that that will happen. I mean I suppose if this was a new school system and I was worried about the performance of the school system persay, but I think because I have been exposed to it before, I'm not worried. . . .I am assured that she will learn to read and learn to attack word skills and math and things like that at a good rate. (Haley)

> I have been thinking that I am glad that she had an older sister and was able to come into the school, the kindergarten a lot, so she is familiar with the place. I was thinking that I feel very comfortable because I know Mrs. Warren and what Janie might go through, in terms of what she will do and the projects they will do and [what we will be] involved with, so I feel very, very comfortable there. There are very few questions I have or concerns. (Janie)

Learning to see a child normatively is one of the major tasks of the kindergarten year. The preschool curriculum, which tends to be child centered and small scale is quite different from the curriculum driven and certainly more batch processed approach that must be taken in a kindergarten classroom. Adult-child ratios and standards for performance set into motion a way of looking that becomes a currency—identities are forged comparatively according to height, age, cutting ability, and prereading skills. Having been through this once provides a context of expectation, with normative elements that work between their children and an individual child and the expected curriculum:

> I am anticipating that my son in kindergarten is the second child and he is a little quieter and seems a little bit further behind than the first. I seem to be comparing them a lot so I am interested to see if he is going to pick up some of the things that they are going to be doing in their kindergarten class and hopefully opening up some of the social skills because he is kind of quiet. He still has a tough time on some letters and other things. I am interested to see how he grows with the rest of the group. . . .My oldest is going into third grade and he is eight. My oldest was fluent speaking at about 2. Barry, it was closer to 4. And my first son, I didn't really have to teach him anything or help him. . .the ABC's or anything, he just knew it. And words and letters and numbers were formed much earlier than my second. (Barry)

Finally, parents' understanding of their *individual children,* shaped by past history and relationship, gives them a way of being with the school. Peter's mom interpreted much of his experience, both at the start of the year and at the end, in terms of his identity as an African-American male in a community dominated by European-Americans. A transfer in from another attendance area, Peter's mother relied on the reputation of Solomon's African-American principal and the school's treatment of children of color when she chose it for her child's elementary school. Mrs. Jefferson, Solomon's principal, had known Peter since he was a baby and she had chosen Mrs. Harris as Peter's teacher because she felt that Mrs. Harris could provide the kind of classroom context that he needed. In the beginning of the year, Peter's mom was apprehensive, given the historical treatment of young black males and the difficulty he had already experienced in his preschool:

> Peter is African-American so I always, as an African-American, I worry about being in a predominantly white town. . . . [At his preschool] they saw him as, he would always shove people, that wasn't what was going on. If he got in line and someone butted him and Peter is definitely aggressive like that so he would and that is definitely one difference between African-American males and European males because they aren't used to that. That always drove me nuts because there was nobody to understand.

Peter's mother had worked hard to support her child's learning that year at Solomon. She read all materials that came home "with a fine tooth comb," she volunteered in the computer lab every month, she helped him with his homework. But it had not been a good year:

> This year was a real struggle for Peter and for me and Mrs. Harris. I'm glad it is over with. There are a lot of things that happen to African-American males and the things that happened to Peter weren't just because he was African-American. But they were even more devastating because he is, because some of the things that did happen or that were said to him are classic statements that are said to African-American people and those really bother me. He was labeled as average at the beginning of the school year and if he worked very very hard, he would be a good strong average student and I thought that was absolutely absurd. . . .He told me that because he didn't know anybody, he didn't have any friends there, he had to play with different people every day and that really made me sad.

Despite her best efforts, even though she had done everything "right," Peter's mom felt that the year had been a great disappointment. On a scale of 1-10, she rated it an 8.5 in terms of disillusionment. She had been pushed out of this public school and was planing to enroll Peter in

a Catholic school the following year. Her interpretations of the feedback the school gave her about Peter, her presence in the school, and her ultimate decision to remove him were framed historically and personally in terms of the complexities of race and the perceived lack of power she had to advance his case in the school.

Biography and personal experience were key resources for parents in this school as they worked to forge relationships that would enhance their child's education. These individual dimensions of the home school relation were intensely personal and were for the most part *outside* the reach of educational personnel. They were elements in what might be thought of as the reaction of relations. In the next section, we turn to an equally salient feature for these families, the social and community connections that provided support, information, and standards for practice.

Social networks

While parents brought to school the baggage of personal experience, they had another source for their entre into schooling.' The cultural practices at Solomon had within them a strong set of *social networks* that were used to help parents understand their role, to provide resources for action, and to set frameworks for performance of all relevant actors. At its most basic, the community located much of its activity within commonly frequented locations. A favorite was the bus stop. More than just a physical place for children to get transported from home to school, the *bus stop* was a cultural resource that provided opportunities for parents to congregate and share information.

> In Wyndham Acres, when the bus comes around, all the mothers are usually out in the morning and a lot of us just get to know each other because we're all from different places and we're all pretty new here. We've been here for two years, most of us. We just pass information that way. And the APT meetings are probably 80-90% Wyndham mothers. We stand outside and talk and really the child and their school is our main concern. (Jack)

> Of course the bus stop is our prime form of communication. There are several parents down there and then we talk about other things that happened at the meeting if one of us couldn't go. What's happening with this committee or that committee. Right now the big one that we're talking about is this foreign language program that is being offered. My neighbor is running that so we talk about that and how much money the APT makes for it and things like what rooms are available and can we use those rooms for our Brownie meetings. All sort of stuff like that. (Mona)

Beyond providing supervision so that their children were safe as they waited for transportation to school, bus stop interactions were a source of relationship and identity. At the busstop, they could find out about programming, about teachers, about what other parents were doing. The political organization of the school was in many ways developed around these bus stop conversations.

Talking with other parents was very important in this school. It provided a myriad of types of support so that they in turn could support their child.

> I talk with other parents. I will call the school too and ask if something is going on. I think my main network is with others parents because there are a lot of parents out here that involved. I try to stay involved to a certain extent. Last year I didn't work so I was free to be at the school and help out during the day. I started working this summer so I can't be at school 2 or 3 days a week. What I am doing this year is I'm organizing the computer lab. (Ellen)

> There are a couple of us that are always at the bus stop every morning and I find out things there and I also find out things from my daycare person Haley does go there. She has older kids that are already in the school so she has experienced it before and knows more about who to contact or why not to do that or whatever. (Haley)

Volunteering is often thought of as a way to be involved by providing the school with much needed people-power. By providing services and time to the school, parents can supplement the resources available to teachers to enhance a child's education. Using Epstein's notion of investment (1994), this would be an investment in material resources with the expectation of later payoff in terms of student achievement. But for these parents, the focus of their volunteer activities was much more personal—they set up opportunities to generate information so that they could better understand their child's experience and it opened spaces for personal relationships with teachers that they could leverage for their child. For some parents, their physical presence provided access to general cultural information so that they could have a situated understanding of their child's schooling:

> I know that there are safety patrol people in the hallways after lunch to tell them not to run and to scoot them out into recess. Things like that, that I only discover because I'm in the halls a lot. . . .so when Mona said that a boy stopped her and said she needed to go out to recess or he was going to tell on her, I knew that he was the safety patrol person. And it wasn't just some kid bullying her. (Mona)

There is information out there. You have to go look for it. That is my spring project every year, to interview other parents. I basically go on that or I keep tuned all year long to what you hear in the hallways about things or comments that you hear on the soccer field. That is another reason that I like to be active in school to get a sense of watching teachers with their classes, with children in the hallway just by spotting them because you see a lot of their behavior. (Tim)

I like to volunteer at school and I did it somewhat last year and I had a great time. One thing that I have found out was that a really positive side effect is that because I went to the class every week, I got to know every kid in the class and I think that made a difference for instance in that she knows that I know who her friends are and she knows that I know who she is talking about and also I could really see what the teacher was like most of the time. (Haley)

Being familiar with their child's routines allowed parents to anticipate potential problems at school and to differentiate the big problems from the little ones. It allowed them to be more informed communicators and decisionmakers—both with their children and with schoolpeople. This need to speak across levels of the school hierarchy was an important attribute with this group. They not only wanted to be able to listen to the children and understand the meaning of daily activities but they also positioned themselves to have a voice with their child's teacher.

This was especially true of parents who were new to the school—those with a kindergarten child who had not had previous experience with Solomon Elementary. Tommy's parents contrasted their experience at their son's day care center and how they felt they'd lost the sense of competence they had there as long time parent-supporters:

Dad: Having been with the same place for so long and having had so active a role, you feel like you know what makes it tick. What the expectations are in terms of leaving him and the whole bit. I don't know the workings here and we're not the kind of people who like to be ignorant. We're going to have to get used to a whole new set of actors and conditions and rules.

Int: How are you going to find that out?

Dad: We'll probably get active again in the operation of whatever the PTO or that kind of thing. We tend to be leadership types. I don't know why.

Mom: We get involved in something and two years later you're the president of the board.

Int: So in terms of getting involved in things, how does that change the way you work in a setting?

Dad: I feel much more comfortable knowing what's happening with a child as opposed to keeping him there all day and then he comes home. Well, this happened at the day care facility. We would send him off and then he comes home and we say, "What did you do all day?" "Nothing." By having some involvement with the place, we have a really good idea of what happens during the day and can start a discussion if we want to. I wouldn't know what he's learning here. I don't know what he's learning or at what rate he's learning. (Tommy)

Being able to start a conversation, situating themselves as equals who have power in educational conversations was an important reason to be physically present and involved in the school. Having a *social relationship* made getting school information much easier. It set interactions on a level field and provided leverage so you could use that relationship to be heard.

If I have things that I am concerned about or not getting answers from my son about what they're doing – Jason, said the other day, "I'm in the yellow reading group." "Oh, great, what is the yellow reading group doing?" "Well, we're not something and we're not doing this." "What are you doing?" "I don't know." So after a while, if I'm not seeing what he's doing in reading in a week or so I'll either pop in – I try to send the teacher a note cause popping in can be disruptive and not every teacher likes parents to do that. I happen to be floating around the school enough anyway cause I'd like to be volunteering in the classroom and I've got some other projects, APT related projects that have me in and out of the school. I like to use those times if I'm around and I see my child's teacher and I say, "Do you have a minute because this is no my mind." If they say "No, I don't have a minute now, let's talk on the phone or write me a note" that's fine with me too. But I do better having contact. I like having the social contact. I think if you have a social contact relationship with somebody then it makes it much easier if you have something good to say, it's easier to give somebody a compliment. If you know who they are and they know who you are or if you have something negative you need to express. (Tim).

While it was important to forge a personal relationship with teachers, a number of parents worried about going over the line. They did not want to appear to be the quintessential "pushy parent" and they monitored their behavior so that they would not be labeled with this nasty image:

> I wonder sometimes how much effect the parents can have and how much difference it makes to the kids if they parents are involved. I think without being – I would not like to be considered an over-bearing, protective mother but I would like to be involved in a lot of things. . . .I found out last year that you can be around there a little bit without upsetting everybody or upsetting the routine and still being able to find out for yourself what was going on. . . .It was better for me to know that then to not know how that all worked. Last year I think I was afraid to go because I thought, well, they don't want us around there and stuff like that. I think you *can* be around there and be involved if you want to. (Haley)

Learning the boundaries for their interactions, how far they can push, and how much they can be present, is a key element for these new elementary school parents. They wrestle with a tension—they firmly believe that they need to be present in multiple ways to make a difference in their child's education but they know that there are standards for those interactions which they must respect. They calibrate their demands and interactions so that the maintain a position of equality with the staff, using their historical perspective over time to redefine a relationship with the school that will benefit their child. They have learned to part of what Delpit (1995) calls the *culture of power* by their presence; they learn its rules, its goals, and its players.

Given the need for physical presence in school, *working parents* are in a bind, particularly if they are in jobs that lack the flexibility to allow them to take time out of the standard working day to leave the workplace. Mona's mother was struggling with how she was going to keep tabs now that, as the result of a divorce, she was heading back into the workforce:

> I am there a lot and that's going to be a problem for me because I'm trying to get back into working and that's a big dilemma that I'm trying to face right now. I do feel sorry for parents who are working full time and don't know all the little idiosyncracies about the school. (Mona)

Maureen's mother echoed this concern as a working mom and pointed to a need for more communication between home and school to help those who must support their children from afar:

> The one thing I would have liked to have had was more contact with the school. Working parents don't have a lot of opportunities outside of conferences. We had one conference in November and that is pretty much it. I came one day when I didn't have school and Maxwell did. I was able to come in the classroom but that was back in the fall so since then there hasn't been a lot of opportunity to have close contact or communication with the teacher. There haven't been other conferences, and other than

> the January report cards, any written information coming home. There are pretty sketchy letters that come home just telling about the events but not a lot detail about the curriculum or about what the goals are of various units. So I have been kind of at a loss to what she is doing in kindergarten. Like all kindergartners she isn't too able to relate her day to me in details especially after she has already been through another program at daycare in the afternoon. It is kind of long gone, what happened in the morning, other than what sticks out in her mind.

The historical participation of parents at Solomon Elementary served as a context for the types of communication used to share educational experiences with parents. A single fall parent-teacher conference, paired with classroom based letters with general discussions of activities were sufficient for families in which an adult was available to witness school activities first-hand. But as with every other aspect of the change in women's participation in the workforce, their necessary absence from the daily life of the school brings up serious questions about the need for new links between the home and school. From the resource of the busstop, to opportunities to gather information in the classroom, to the development of social relationships with school staff, working mothers find that distance from their child's school experience is multiplied, leaving them without basic information, let alone the leverage to change an educational trajectory.

The social scene at Solomon was alive with activity. It provided rich opportunity and resources for parents to shape their child's educational experience. It was a resource that was allocated unequally, however, with parents who had the luxury of schedule flexibility and economic stability placed first in line. They shaped policy and practice at the school and their actions were focused on the best interest of their children. There were concerns about the needs of others, particularly working parents but change had not caught up with the concern.

Discussion

This analysis of the emerging relations between parents and school people at Solomon Elementary was undertaken from a particular perspective. We were interested in understanding the connections between home and school in the context of social relationships shaped by social and historical contexts in personal ways. The use of Bakhtin's ideas of addressivity, answerability, and ethical activity leveraged readings that located the actions and perspectives of parents in both the social and biographical. Each parent met the school through their personal experience, using as resources their personal history, their experience with older siblings, and their unique understanding of their child to shape the template for the home-school relationship. Their actions with the school *came out of*, or were an act of addressivity from their distinctly personal place in the world. Their ethical responsibility was set biographically, stories within stories, parables from experience.

But this place was set in a context of social networks that were unique to the Solomon community. The school neighborhood was replete with groups of individuals working for the school, but more importantly, for their children. Their actions were premised on the need to witness the work of the school so that they could know the setting and better understand its working. They even traded on personal relationships with staff to help their child. An ethic of individual responsibility was linked with the power of the group to set into motion alliances and actions in the school. For those not on the inside it was a system that did not serve everyone well.

The question that has come out of this work for us is still related to ethical activity. The parent child relationship is one of the most passionate we know. It is founded on a love that is intense and long lasting. Adding an institution like the school to this relationship, through the work of individual teachers, is a complicated act, fraught with tensions and unknowns. The self-interest that is inherent in parenting is played out in home-school interactions and should be explored within both its individual and social dimensions if we are going to consider the needs and responsibilities of *all* children and their families.

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